

Working Toward Better Discussions: Can Pre-Teaching Topic-Related Vocabulary Positively Affect the Quality of Group Interaction?

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ABSTRACT

This study looked at how a brief consciousness-raising vocabulary activity would enhance the quality of an extended group discussion. The participants in this study were low-intermediate 1st-year Japanese university students in a compulsory English Discussion course. The experimental group was first exposed to key words using extracts of a pre-lesson reading article and then provided a list of the same words for quick reference during group discussions. The results show that, on average, they produced a broader range of the target vocabulary and a marginally higher level of interaction. This study will consider both the efficacy of this activity and whether the use of topic-related vocabulary has a significant effect on the quality of discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The context of this study is the English Discussion Class Program (EDC) at Rikkyo University, Tokyo. A typical Discussion class is organized into approximately eight stages, beginning with a homework reading quiz and followed by a fluency exercise, function phrase presentation, a practice activity, a preparation activity and short discussion (D1), and a final preparation activity and extended discussion (D2). Throughout this sequence are regular intervals of instructor and peer feedback including a summary at the end of the lesson. Essentially, the lesson structure is controlled, student-centered, and easy to facilitate.

The overarching goal of the program is “to develop student’s communicative abilities so that they can hold fluent, interactive discussions in groups of four for 16 minutes or more on a single topic. Discussions should be balanced and interactive, and constructed by all participants” (Center for English Discussion, 2014, p. 1). Hence, vocabulary teaching and learning of function phrase units to build discourse competence is the central component of this program, but, what about the actual content of these “interactive discussions”? What other factors could contribute to a group’s ability to speak effectively and meaningfully for 16 minutes on topics as varied as language-learning, gender equality, technology, or the death penalty? The answer is, of course, multifaceted, but of all the skills and tools that teachers try to develop in learners, I would point to Wilkins (1972): “without vocabulary, *nothing* can be conveyed” (111).

My own informal EDC classroom observations suggest that discussions might benefit from broadening student’s knowledge and use of topic-related or content-specific vocabulary. In a unit on crime and punishment, featuring such questions as “Is the death penalty a good way to punish murderers?” students could be expected to encounter basic concepts and words like “death penalty”, “crime”, and “murderer” – words that would appear to be essential to understanding and the group’s ability to build an interesting discussion.

Substantial research has been done on how many words learners ought to know, but the bulk of the emphasis relates to academic words, reading comprehension, and writing (Coxhead, 2000; Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996). Concerning the effect of vocabulary use on oral discourse and spoken output, I identified with the principles outlined by Nation (2001) when designing the

consciousness-raising activity for this study: they are the use of word lists in addition to presenting words in context, and the recognition of the value of translation between L1 and L2 in vocabulary learning, the effect of the learning burden on students, and the value of direct explanation over just incidental learning (Read, 2000).

Starting with the assumption that pre-teaching specific low-frequency vocabulary will enable and even encourage the learners to more precisely express their ideas, heighten discussion of concepts (crime, murder, guilt), interact in a manner that is fluid and unburdened by overly excessive negotiations of meaning or halting requests for translation, this study asks the question: Does pre-teaching low-frequency topic-related vocabulary positively affect the quality of group interaction?

METHOD

Participants

This study analyzed the group discussions of 36 Japanese university students during one unit (Lesson 10) of the second semester of an English Discussion program. Compulsory for 4,953 first-year students, the program consisted of 14 weekly 90-minute lessons comprised of seven to nine members. The sample group was drawn from six Level 3 classes (low-intermediate, TOEIC score range 280 to 479) and IC recordings were made during the final group discussion stage of the lesson. Both the experimental and control groups contained 18 students and recordings took place over periods of 12 minutes (for three-member groups), 16 minutes (four-member), and in one case, 20 minutes (five-member).

Level 3 was chosen as the focus of this study because a) it contained the largest sample size and b) it evinced the clearest examples of how increased *or* insufficient vocabulary knowledge might affect the quality of a discussion. Having demonstrated essential functions and communication skills (giving and asking for opinions, reasons, examples; expressing agreement or disagreement; asking questions, etc.), Level 3 classes could progress from simply filling time with talk to constructing more complex discussions. Finally, it should be noted that classes in this sample group were randomly designated “experimental” or “control” in order to bolster the reliability of the results.

Procedure

After the function practice stage of the lesson the instructor prompted the students to consider key words related to the topic of crime, punishment, and the right to life. Students were given worksheets (See Appendix) containing five sentences from the reading article and, with a partner, asked to discern and explain to each other in Japanese the meaning of 12 underlined key words. After 2.5 minutes, the pairs could unfold the work sheet and cross-reference the English key words with their Japanese translations below. Finally, the instructor checked that these vocabulary items were understood, offering a brief example or definition where necessary. Both tables of students were then given a decontextualized word list (A4, enlarged) for quick use during D1 and D2. This activity totaled 5 minutes. In the final third of the lesson, IC recordings were made of both tables in D2. The questions put to the students were:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the death penalty...
 - a. From the criminal’s point of view?
 - b. From the victim’s family’s point of view?
 - c. From ordinary people’s point of view?

- d. (your own ideas)
2. Is the death penalty a good way to punish murderers?

RESULTS

From the data collected, three points of analysis were established: 1) the average number of occurrences of key-word use was determined and contrasted with their rate of frequency in the textbook, 2) instances of negotiation of meaning (NoM) between speaker and listener(s) were counted, and 3) the quality of group interaction was measured by the average number of ideas, follow-up questions, open questions, turn-taking questions, and individual English reactions that were uttered.

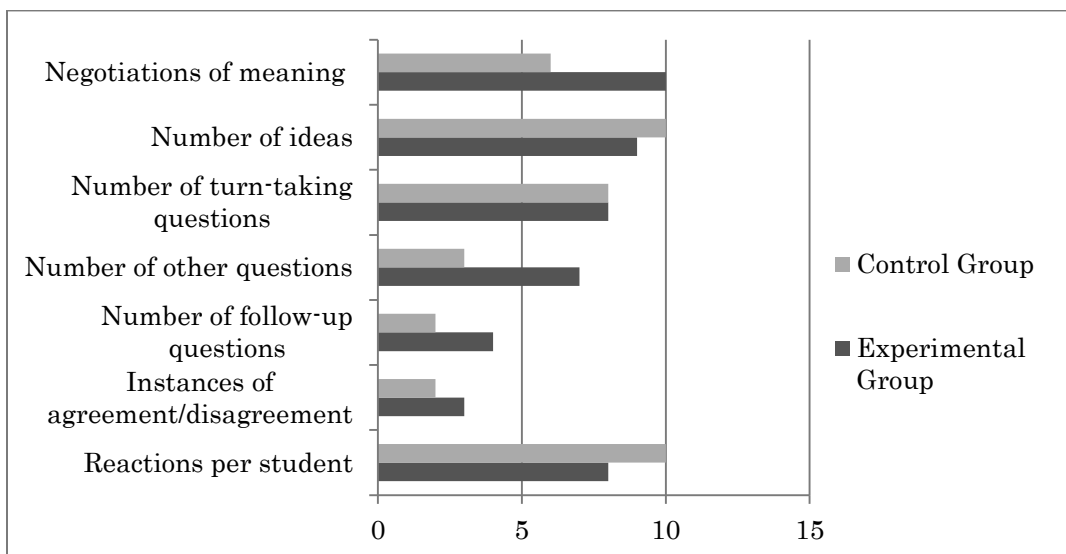
The results show modest differences between both groups at all levels of analysis, with vocabulary use measurements exhibiting the most pronounced difference. Here, the control group's use largely concentrated on the words with the highest-frequency while the experimental group demonstrated a broader range and noticeable consciousness of key words.

Table 1. Comparison of target vocabulary occurrences in textbook unit with Discussion 2

Target Word	Textbook occurrences /1571 tokens	Experimental group average number of occurrences	Control group average number of occurrences
Death penalty	34	15	19
Murderer	22	13	18
Punishment	17	3	4
Prison	13	9	5
Criminal	13	2	2
Murder	12	3	1
Crime	9	2	0
Judge	6	2	2
Innocent	3	1	4
Rehabilitation	2	1	0
Guilty	1	0	0

While both groups had a comparable number of ideas, the experimental discussion groups demonstrated, on average, a more interactive level of discourse.

Table 2. Comparison of average number of interactions in Discussion 2



DISCUSSION

In the study I have described here, a short consciousness-raising task and word list facilitated a less restrained exchange of ideas, opinions, and questions. At the very least, exposure to conceptually related words such as *crime*, *punishment*, *guilt*, *innocence*, and *rehabilitation* might have opened the lines of inquiry through which speaker and listener could agree or disagree, paraphrase comments, pursue questions, and negotiate meaning on the topic of capital punishment. This, I believe, can be taken as a small gain and a worthwhile objective of a discussion-centered course like EDC. To this end, further consideration ought to be given to teaching useful vocabulary in the most effective and timesaving way possible.

My selection of the target vocabulary to create a topic-related set was conscious of textbook frequency but primarily concerned with usability and value, what Neumann and Dwyer (2009) put as “the words we must know to communicate effectively” (385). However, words the instructor values or determines to be worthy of attention does not guarantee a desirable outcome of knowledge and use. The relatively low average rate of occurrence within both the experimental and control groups suggests otherwise. Examining the same context, Edwards (2013) observed that the learning burden of function phrase and topic-related vocabulary, relative to the duration of the lesson (90 minutes), was problematic for Level 3 learners. To alleviate this, he proposed keeping target language visible on the whiteboard throughout the lesson. In this study, word lists were kept on the table but it may be that students in the experiment discussion groups found little need for lower frequency words, were unable to process them beyond a receptive level, or utilized synonyms or other words through NoM translations.

Does NoM detract from the flow of ideas? It is possible, of course, but NoM was not observed to have any adverse effect on interaction in either the experimental or control group. Paraphrasing, checking for understanding, and L1-L2/L2-L1 translations do provide

opportunities for language acquisition, and it is notable that more than 60% of instances of NoM in both groups involved L1-to-L2 translation of low-frequency topic-related words such as “deterrent,” “atone” and “justice.” The speaker’s need for these words, and the discussion group’s incidental exposure to them, supports the value of providing opportunities to notice low-frequency content-related vocabulary in lesson materials.

Limitations

For a more comprehensive analysis, this study could be expanded in three areas: the sample size, the depth of analysis of the group interaction, and the period of data collection. There are four levels in the EDC program that represent a wide spectrum of proficiency levels. A larger sample size that incorporated more of these learners may yield more insights into how a vocabulary-learning burden affects different groups.

This study would have also benefited from a more multidimensional analysis of the quality of interaction. To measure and judge “quality”, the number of ideas, NoM, listener reactions, and the number of listener-to-speaker questions were marked. All of these factors were counted, averaged and then attributed to a discussion group instead of individual speaker. However, without analyzing the actual balance of individual speaking turns per group, this study does not tell us much about the rate of participation.

Finally, the reader should note that data was collected only in the second discussion of one course unit (Lesson 10). An examination of D1 and D2 would help us glean how much vocabulary was useful, discarded, and relevant to the learner over two discussions. From that position, one might undertake a closer assessment of the vocabulary activity and design a more inclusive, wide-ranging study over more than one course unit.

CONCLUSION

The context in which this study was undertaken is a compulsory discussion-based course for first-year Japanese university students, with the primary and secondary goals of improving discourse competency and speaking fluency. Consequently, the limited sample size of this vocabulary study means that further research in this teaching context is required before any systematic change could be implemented to EDC course materials, instructional practices, and curricular goals.

Be that as it may, a slightly higher rate of interaction was observed in the experimental group. The random selection of Level 3 participants for this study suggests this difference could be attributed to group dynamics and individual variance in motivation, fluency, content knowledge, and other such factors. However, the results also favor the idea that the level of content and interaction in a discussion might benefit from an increased knowledge and broader application of relevant vocabulary.

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APPENDIX

1. "Can murderers and other criminals change if they spend a long time in prison?"
 2. "The lay judges have to decide if the person is guilty."
 3. "But fines or community service are not good punishments for serious crimes, such as murder."
 4. "During the 20th century, at least 23 innocent people were killed by the death penalty in the US."
 5. "Some people believe that some murderers cannot be rehabilitated."
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1. "Can 殺人者 and other 犯罪者 change if they spend a long time in 刑務所?"
 2. "The 裁判員 have to decide if the person is 罪を犯した."
 3. "But fines or 社会奉仕 are not good 刑罰 for serious 犯罪, such as 殺人."
 4. "During the 20th century, at least 23 無邪気な people were killed by 死刑 in the US."
 5. "Some people believe that some murderers cannot be 修復する."